

LOCAL EQUITY ACTION DEVELOPMENT (LEAD)

Shana Ritter and Russell J. Skiba

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INTRODUCTION

Our schools are mandated by law to provide educational opportunities to benefit all students. However, many of our students are not succeeding. There remain gaps in achievement, graduation, retention, suspension, expulsion, and special education that affect children of color and children of poverty.

The disproportionality of culturally diverse students in special education has been a persistent and complex issue.¹ While disproportionality has been well studied, there are no definitive answers as to why it occurs. However, when teachers feel that they cannot provide the resources students need, or when students appear not to conform to norms of the school system, teachers often turn to special education as a resource which is consistently and readily available.²

Local Equity Action Development (LEAD) is a local change process grounded in cultural competence that addresses disproportionality in special education and other equity issues facing schools. This brief will describe LEAD, outline the concept of cultural competence, and offer examples of how LEAD is being implemented in a number of Indiana school corporations.

DISPROPORTIONALITY IS AN ISSUE OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY.

The disproportionality of students of color in educational programs cannot be fully comprehended as long as it is considered a singular event, divorced from the broader context of American education and American society. The No Child Left Behind Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) mandate that we provide all children with the opportunity to succeed. The persistence of disproportionality illustrates the challenge we face in providing an effective and equitable education for all children.

One step in providing instruction and curriculum that can reach a diverse student population is to examine our own practices and beliefs through a cultural lens. Cultural competence, or culturally responsive pedagogy, provides a conceptual framework through which we can develop a better understanding of how to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

Indiana Public Law 221 states that schools must develop strategies to meet the needs of all students and that these strategies must be culturally competent.

Cultural competence is a developmental process through which a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies come together to form a system which works

effectively across cultures. Being culturally competent means possessing the capacity to function effectively in cultural contexts which differ from your own.³

Being culturally competent requires knowledge, skills, experience, and the ability to engage in practices which result in improved services and outcomes for all students. Many kinds of diversity training stress the appreciation of other cultures, but appreciation alone does not provide the skills and knowledge that teachers and schools need to effectively work with students across all cultures. Offering students an array of books representing different cultures is one thing, but teaching students from all different backgrounds how to read is another.⁴

Cultural competence means asking difficult questions about why some students succeed and others don't, carefully examining our own data, and applying what we learn to what we do. Most of all it requires that we engage in difficult dialogues, asking ourselves what we are doing to create practices that will benefit all our students, especially those who have not benefited before.

What is Disproportionality in Special Education?

Disproportionality exists when a specific group is over or under represented in a specific category or area. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) entitles all individuals with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education, and mandates nondiscriminatory assessment, identification, and placement of children with disabilities.

THE LEAD PROCESS

1. **Form a planning team.** The initial planning team identifies areas of greatest concern, considers available data, and defines new data that may need to be collected. The team then recruits additional members who will represent key constituencies in the district.
2. **Identify the action of greatest potential impact.** The team, based on data regarding special education students, focus groups, and additional information, develops a hypothesis on why they think disproportionality is occurring. Then they identify strategies, programs, or interventions they believe have the greatest probability of impacting the identified problem.
3. **Develop the plan.** The team synthesizes the existing information from previous phases, researches best practices, and designs a pilot program and action plan for implementation. An effective plan should a) be tailored to meet the needs and culture of the school corporation, b) reflect knowledge of best practice, and c) identify data to assess whether the LEAD project is having an impact on the identified concerns.
4. **Implement the plan.** Share applicable data and decisions that directly affect schools, and continue discussions about equity and cultural competence. Districts vary greatly in how they choose to implement; some begin in two or three schools while others choose to pilot elements of the plan in all schools.
5. **Assess and adapt.** Assessment and adaptation are ongoing. For example, one school realized some groups of parents were not participating, so a group of teachers conducted action research on parent involvement at the kindergarten level. In other districts, as the importance of cultural competence became clear, study groups were formed at various school sites on that topic.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ACTION: THE LEAD PROJECTS.

The LEAD process developed directly out of work with school corporations that expressed a desire to address disproportionality in special education in their own districts. Early on in the process the need to understand and develop culturally competent practices and policies became evident, as did the complexities of addressing equity. Corporations participating in LEAD have chosen to address disproportionality in special education by piloting strategies developed locally and based on their own data, needs, and culture.

LEAD teams, composed of district leaders and project staff, work together to understand disproportionality on both local and national levels (see description of the LEAD process, above). The team collects and analyzes data, researches best practices, and develops and implements an approach specific to the district that will have the greatest impact on disproportionality. The model is based on four assumptions:

- *All plans must be local*, addressing local realities and local needs. In order to address the complexity of disproportionality issues for culturally and linguistically diverse students in a way that is meaningful and appropriate to the culture of that district, plans must originate from within the district.
- Local data is an essential first step in planning. Local data on equity provide a framework that can motivate and guide local remediation efforts, and the success of any systems change efforts can be judged only by changes in those data.

- LEAD must be an *active collaboration between general education and special education*.
- Conversations about race, disproportionality, and equity are essential. While these conversations are awkward and often difficult, they are a critical step in the ongoing process of developing cultural competence.

Local LEAD teams meet on a monthly to bi-monthly basis. At meetings, teams monitor the LEAD plan, link the LEAD projects to other initiatives, and work on cultural competence. In some districts the LEAD team has become the mechanism to connect all initiatives which address disproportionality and equity issues.

Five questions are continuously addressed throughout the LEAD process:

- What do we know about disproportionality in our district?
- What actions can we take to have the greatest impact on disproportionality in our schools?
- Who needs to be involved in planning and decisions?
- How do we include others in the process?
- How will we know if we are making a difference?

WHAT DO THE LEAD PROJECTS LOOK LIKE IN THE SCHOOLS?

As noted, a key assumption of LEAD is that all plans are locally based. Thus, we do not expect standard LEAD plans. Rather, each participating district will develop its own LEAD project that is uniquely tailored to the

needs they have identified in their schools with their students. The following sections describe some of the directions taken by LEAD districts in developing their local plans: General Education Intervention (GEI), Early Literacy, Family and Community Involvement, and Cultural Competence Training.

General Education Intervention (GEI) Process

Some of the LEAD corporations address disproportionality by restructuring and reforming the general education intervention (GEI) teams and the pre-referral process. After assessing current GEI processes, LEAD teams research best practices for GEI teams through the literature, visitations to other districts, and presentations. As a result, they reform their GEI teams to include these components:

- form a team with diverse representation;
- use standard documentation completed before the meeting;
- use a rotating case manager,
- implement culturally competent, research-based strategies;
- hold follow-up meetings; and
- develop family involvement.

Districts collect data on each point in the pre-referral process and Center staff analyze these data in order better understand where disproportionality occurs and which changes in the process are working effectively on a short-term and individual school basis. Process monitoring and professional development and support for GEI teams is ongoing, managed by the district LEAD team.

Early Literacy

By implementing a primary-level instruction-based literacy initiative, schools in one participating district seek to reduce behavior problems, raise achievement, and lower referrals to special education. Teachers trained in the balanced literacy approach used by the district are placed in classrooms to work with small groups of students in collaboration with the classroom teachers. The approach offers the opportunity to form closer relationships with students by decreasing the student-to-adult ratio, and provides extra opportunities for individual support.

Family and Community Involvement

One district felt that family involvement, especially at points of transition in their children's education, is an important factor in addressing disproportionate referral and identification for special education service. Through focus groups with teachers and parents, it became evident that the schools were not reaching some groups of parents, especially poor and minority families. The schools created a parent liaison position, began using parent mentors, and took meetings to the parents by going to housing communities and holding activities off site.

Cultural Competence Training

Every LEAD district has found that addressing disproportionality naturally leads to conversations on cultural competence, equity and race. Some of the ways in which schools work to develop cultural competence are:

- Holding facilitated conversations on race.
- Creating a cultural competence rubric for instruction, policies, and practice.
- Creating study groups using text-based discussions on race, equity, and application to practice.
- Examining local and national data to better understand the impact of race and issues of equity on teaching and learning.
- Developing questions that raise the issue of race and equity in planning, practice, and policy.

IMPACT OF THE LEAD PROJECTS

Most of the LEAD projects are in the early stages and have only begun implementation. The Equity Project is currently working with participating districts to develop an evaluation strategy to monitor short-term impacts in terms of referrals and staff attitudes, and the long-term impact on rates of disproportional-

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

- **Data** are an integral part of the process. When a school uses data intentionally to raise questions about practice it begins to bring accountability for equity inside.
- **Conversing** about issues of equity, especially race, is a developmental process; ample time to build trust is necessary. These conversations are most effective when facilitated.
- **Ownership** of the process grows through action. Dialogue with colleagues is most meaningful when applied to developing, implementing and assessing the LEAD plan.
- **Sustainability** in addressing equity issues is more likely to occur when LEAD is incorporated into the district's overall plans for school improvement and other initiatives and is understood as an effort that benefits all children.
- **Collaboration** between special education and general education is essential. It is best when leadership is shared and LEAD is viewed as a joint endeavor.

ity in special education. Over the first phase of development of the LEAD projects, however, the participants and project staff have learned several important lessons (summarized in "Lessons from the Field," above). For example, it has become apparent that LEAD projects must be incorporated into the district's overall plan for school improvement. There are simply too many different school reform initiatives for school improvement currently implemented to add yet another. Rather, equity initiatives work best when they are integrated in ongoing initiatives and other programs.

SUMMARY

The LEAD process offers a collaborative model for local school districts to address disproportionality and other issues of equity in a manner that stresses cultural competence. Local teams move through a process in which they identify an action that they believe will have the greatest potential impact, develop and implement a plan around that action, and use local data to assess the effects of their plan and continue to adapt and improve it. Since each district, indeed each school, is unique, plans are not "one-size-fits-all" but are rather individually tailored to meet the unique needs of the district, and the schools and students in that district. As those plans come to be fully implemented in the coming months and years, evaluation will consider both their short- and long-term effects. In the meantime, however, those districts implementing LEAD projects have taken the critical and courageous first step in remediating inequity, looking squarely at their own data and saying, "There's a problem here. Let's fix it."

BECOMING INVOLVED

For more information on LEAD, Disproportionality in Special Education, and The Equity Project, contact CEEP at 812-855-4438 or visit our Web site: <http://ceep.indiana.edu/equity>

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Skiba, R.J. et al. (2006). The context of minority disproportionality: Practitioner perspectives on special education referral. *Teachers College Record*, 108(7), 1424-1459.
- ² Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- ³ Villegas, A.M., & Lucas, T. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teachers: rethinking the curriculum. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(1), 20-32.
- ⁴ Nieto, S. (2002/2003). Profoundly multicultural questions. *Educational Leadership*, 60(4), 6-10.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Blumer, I., & Tatum, B.D. (1999). Creating a community of allies: How one school system attempted to create an anti-racist environment. *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 2(3), 255-267.
- Johnson, R.S. (2002). *Using data to close the achievement gap: How to measure equity in our schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Singleton, G.E., & Linton, C. (2006). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Skiba et al. (2004). *Moving towards equity: Addressing disproportionality in special education*. Bloomington, IN: Center for Evaluation and Education Policy.

AUTHORS

Shana Ritter is Coordinator of the Equity Project at the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy.

Russell J. Skiba is Director of the Equity Project at the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy.

About The Equity Project

The Equity Project is a consortium of projects dedicated to providing high quality data to educational decision-makers in order to better understand and address issues regarding educational equity and bridge the gap between research and practice. The Equity Project's mission is to provide evidence-based information specific to issues of school discipline, school violence, special education, and equality of educational opportunity for all students. Specifically, the Equity Project (a) provides data on these issues, (b) focuses on understanding the causes and conditions that create inequities, and (c) provides support and technical assistance to educational agencies seeking to create equitable school systems. The Equity Project supports educators and educational institutions in developing and maintaining safe, effective, and equitable learning opportunities for all students. The work of the Equity Project is guided by the following principles:

Disproportionality is a complex issue that will not respond to simplistic solutions.

- Although the fact of disproportionality has been well-documented, its causes and the paths to improvement are by no means fully understood. It is important, therefore, to refrain from assigning blame, but instead to work together to understand the data and its implications.

Data indicating disparity must be taken seriously.

- Data that reveal continuing disparities for certain groups are remarkably consistent, and deserve serious consideration. Examining local, state, and national data is an important first step in the process of understanding and remediating inequity.

Creating equitable school systems is a long-term process requiring long-term commitment.

- Problems of disproportionality and inequity in our nation and our schools were created over long periods of time and will not be resolved quickly. Thus a long-term institutional commitment is required that includes attention to difficult topics like race, and the ongoing integration of cultural competence as a key component in policy and practice.

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